

In Search of the A Word: Can Ambition survive in TEFL?

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Many native speakers in our profession are children of the '60s and '70s, the decades when, my students kindly inform me, old people were born. Consequently, most of us remember the subsequent decade, when pop stars wore gold suits and politician's names entered dictionaries with words such as *reaganomics* and *thatcherite*. This decade of Texas oil barons and shoulder pads greatly influenced those of a certain generation, particularly it seems for those in our profession in our ability to identify with the A word. Search for it in the body of literature surrounding ELT; I promise it's hard to find. Look for it on teaching forums; you'll be hard pressed to find anyone raising the issue. Indeed, one of the few places you will find the word *ambition* is in job ads, such as those for the enticingly epidemic-free schools in South East Asia. So, why is it so difficult to find mention of the word *ambition* in our profession, and what exactly do those language schools really want when they hire dynamic, ambitious teachers? Putting images of Simon Le Bon on a yacht singing 'her name is Rio' aside, there are several clear reasons why ambition is seemingly intangible in our profession.

In at the deep end

Let's consider the bizarre nature of certain facets of our profession. Few professions deliver the baptism of fire that ours offers. Consider the path of entry for native speakers,

the majority of whom have an incredible amount to deal with in their first few weeks on the job. In most industries, despite globalisation greatly changing the nature of work in the twenty-first century, experienced professionals throughout numerous disciplines, ten/fifteen years into their career, embark on posts in foreign climes, by which time they know their jobs thoroughly, have developed levels of confidence in their abilities, usually take family as further nurture, and, given they're generally arriving to fulfill high-level positions, have neither financial worries nor uncertainties about being stranded alone in a strange land. Contrast this with the typical ELT professional: the first day on the job is often in an unfamiliar country. During this period of adjustment the teacher is also getting their first experience of teaching, daunting enough without the effects of culture shock. Add to this factors like financial insecurities, linguistic difficulties and little emotional support and it's apparent why the start of our careers is so traumatic. This surely influences the ambitions of those taking their first steps into the world of English teaching.

Running to standstill?

Our profession works in contrast to many others; this is obvious when comparing it to just about any other. For example, a friend of mine started working part-time at our local supermarket when he was sixteen. Years later, he'd worked his way from lowly shelf stacker to assistant manager, relentlessly developing new skills and steadily progressing, having a satisfying career with upward mobility, culminating in an overseas position. What he didn't do was spend many years reflecting on shelf-stacking to become as

accomplished a shelf stacker as possible. So, along with overseas positions only coming after several years, there was always a sense of purpose to his career. Teachers do the opposite: we spend large parts of our career trying to get better at the same job that we had when we began. However we look at it, this lack of tangible progression affects a teacher's ambitions. We work hard to remain at what could be considered the bottom rung of the ladder. Professional development is admirable; our profession is all the better for it. Are we, though, thinking about ourselves when we broaden our abilities to deliver in the classroom? Are we satisfying our own needs while participating in training courses? Are we considering our careers or futures? Do we perceive ourselves as ambitious individuals simply because we devote time to enhancing our abilities to teach?

Admitting we have ambition

Another reason why ambition is hard to track down is its perception among ELT professionals. Consider the following and see how familiar it sounds; when asking colleagues if they consider themselves ambitious, I'm often met with the response, 'I don't know if I'd call myself ambitious but...' which is routinely followed with some justification about achieving personal satisfaction or self-actualisation. It feels like we're frightened to admit that we want to achieve anything for ourselves, almost as though it were a character flaw. Naturally, there are good reasons for this, and several possible causes spring to mind. Firstly, we must consider the kind of people enter language teaching. Could we describe ourselves as money driven go-getters with a desire to succeed or be damned? It doesn't really sound right, does it? Maybe we don't possess

what's traditionally viewed as the need to succeed, the need for money and power. This argument in itself seems too simplistic, and other external issues must come into play. An infamous article in Britain's Telegraph newspaper a few years ago highlighted the horrors we face in terms of mistreatment by employers and the low income positions some are forced to endure. After years of poor treatment and living in the gutter, the ELT professional is conditioned into seeing low self-esteem as an inescapable part of their lives. Sadly, I think we all know true life cases that exemplify this symptom of the language teaching industry. After all these downtrodden experiences resulting from time spent teaching English, can any ambitious individual retain their desire? When we can so easily think of people we know who seem caught in a cycle of low paying jobs, who are scared to return to their home country in case they find out just how badly off they are, can we really consider this a profession in which a meaningful career can be had, or just an industry that some of us adventurous, free-spirited souls were unlucky enough to get caught up in?

The industry vs. the profession

Let's examine that word industry. The late Sir Alec Guinness once famously commented, upon returning to the stage after a spell in Hollywood, how nice it was to get back to the acting 'profession' after spending some time in the 'industry'. The contrast between the two is as strong in our chosen field as it was for Sir Alec, and the difference between the factions has a great influence on ambition. Many of us work in private language schools and are aware of the need to get the punters in. Perhaps we also use course books chosen

because of an ‘incentive’ offered by the publisher. Certainly, there are countless reputable, professional schools out there, but these two examples illustrate where the priorities lie for many language instruction providing institutions, and it’s not always with the aspirations of their teaching staff. Furthermore, as many of us start out in such work environments, we encounter the realities of the TEFL industry immediately. Naturally, language teaching is not alone in experiencing such issues but it does explain why the job can become so dispiriting. Furthermore, language teaching shares characteristics with other jobs which are seen as not offering careers for the ambitious. Few embark on a career in hospitality, for example, if they want to get on in life. The hospitality industry is renowned for factors such as labour intensity, high staff turnover and poor pay and working conditions due to lack of trade union representation or professional support. Ring any bells? The aforementioned ‘stranger in a strange land’ factor merely compounds the problem; people entering our profession aren’t only being offered poor pay and dubious contracts, they’re entering these situations alone, far from home. How many ambitious individuals are being lost from an industry that is increasingly based around making money?

Summing up

So, what can we do? We can’t fundamentally change the nature of the job: we’re teachers and we’ll remain teachers. It’s more likely then, to meet our ambitions, we’ll need to become ‘teachers plus’, branching out into different fields, such as becoming course book writers or regulars on the conference circuit. Secondly, we must admit that it’s OK to be

ambitious and that this doesn't necessarily have negative connotations. Furthermore, we must accept that it's not OK to live in poverty and be mistreated by employers; this is the area in which we can increasingly take control of ELT. Think about it, if you can get a job without any qualifications or experience, will it be a good job? If you're serious about doing this for a living, should you even consider taking such employment? In the past it wasn't easy to uncover information regarding overseas employers, although if someone is prepared to give you a job without you having undertaken any training, they probably won't care about treating you ethically, as there's always someone else waiting to take your place. There are even less excuses with the proliferation of job discussion forums, where you can find out what you're getting yourselves into by reading about others' experiences and asking questions. Blogs are another way of finding out what you're likely to encounter when you move abroad to teach. I'm a huge supporter of teaching blogs; they are becoming an ever more effective way of preparing for the culture shock that TEFLers face when they move to a new country and can provide invaluable information on how to avoid an early departure from what many of us believe to be a rewarding career. More than ever, there's little reason not to enter our profession without ambition.